



**Nassau County Department of Assessment**

240 Old Country Road, Room 400

Mineola, New York 11501

(516) 571-2490

November 28, 2006

Dear Editor:

One of the true blessings of the holiday season is being able to celebrate with family and friends in the comfort of ones own home.

Unfortunately, the lack of affordable housing and rental units has given rise to a group of unscrupulous profiteers who have quietly carved up single-family zoned homes and created illegal and unsafe rooming houses throughout the county. Many of these illegal hotels are often partitioned with makeshift walls of sheets or drywall and have only one direct access way leading out of the home, placing tenants, police and firefighters at risk for serious injury or death.

These illegal rooming houses serve no other purpose than lining the owners' pockets with cash that is, in most cases, not reported as income for tax purposes. Homeowners who live near these rental units can attest to the fact that the quality of life in their once quiet neighborhoods has been shattered by the incursion of these "improvised hotels."

As Chairman of the Nassau County Board of Assessors, I am not the elected official in-charge of writing or enforcing zoning laws and building codes; nor can I impose high fines that would act as a deterrent. However, I can and have reclassified three dozen residential properties to the commercial class code (with an average property tax rate of over 2 ½ times higher) for taxation purposes until the violation is corrected.

My initiative not only gives villages and towns a formidable means to combat the growth of illegal rooming houses throughout the county, but its success can be measured in real terms. To date, 13 of the 36 properties are now paying thousands of dollars more in school property taxes and nine illegal rooming houses have closed down.

From an enforcement position, this is an important first step. Nevertheless, we must also recognize that there is a "human equation" involved. The desperate tenants who rent these illegal rooms or apartments are doing so because of the lack of legal and affordable rental units on the Island. If we are truly going to solve the issue of illegal apartments, we have to address the need for affordable workforce apartments and housing.

In 2004, when I announced my reclassification initiative, I called on elected officials at the town and state levels of government to work together to change zoning laws and provide the tax incentives needed to allow for the construction of affordable residential apartments above stores in downtown business areas throughout the county – similar to the beautiful buildings that have been built in cities throughout Florida.

While many elected officials have embraced some of my suggestions relating to improving enforcement measures, no one has stepped forward to say that they will act on my call for a unified effort to address the affordable housing issue. Without immediate action, the Black Market of illegal rentals will continue to erode our cherished suburban way of life.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Harvey B. Levinson".

HARVEY B. LEVINSON

Chairman, Board of Assessors